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AUTHOR	Shack, Sybil
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ABSTRACT

Despite the traditional problems posed by word pronunciation and etymology, a system of spelling instruction which takes into account some of the following suggestions should prove helpful to teachers at both the elementary and secondary school levels: (1) make children word-conscious--anything which makes the pupil look at and think about a word is useful; (2) teach words which are needed and used by children--it's the basic words which are so often misspelled; (3) take individual differences among pupils into account--poor spellers may need individual help, good spellers can work more independently; (4) utilize written rather than oral drills--a good deal of the work done in oral spelling is a waste of time; (5) utilize phonics only as a guide--innumerable spelling errors arise as a result of trying to make English spelling conform to "phonics"; (6) deal with a reasonable number of words in a spelling lesson--even for good spellers it is a mistake to present 20 words or so at one time, especially is they are not closely related in structure. (MF)

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Simply Spelling

SYBIL SHACK

Teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels should find Dr. Shack's suggestions about spelling instruction informative and useful. Her points are generously supported by concrete examples.

The other day a woman came in to see me about her little boy's poor spelling. "It's the television," she said, "and the comic books. Why doesn't the television spell words right? Why aren't comic books outlawed?" I could not answer either of her questions, but I could tell her that people had trouble with English spelling long before either television or comic books appeared on the scene. To quote G. H. Vallins, an English authority on spelling and language, "The modern school boy is not alone in his shame; he is in a glorious succession of knights and squires, nobles and princes, kings and queens." In fact, although I am not normally a betting woman, I would be willing to wager that not one of the readers of this journal always spells perfectly either.

Our spelling problems are not surprising when we take into account the character and history of the English language, the wide range of pronunciation of individual words, the erratic and unorthodox spelling of its various sounds, the diverse sources from which English words are derived, the relationship of spelling to etymology—sometimes false, and to pronunciation long outgrown.

Let's take pronunciation. In some parts of the English-speaking world *awe* and *are* are homophones; that is, they are pronounced exactly alike. In our part of the world they are quite different in pronunciation. In some parts of the world *might* or *mite* and *mate* are pronounced alike. In our part of the world they are quite different in pronunciation. Imagine what confusion would be created if we tried to spell them phonetically in ordinary written communication.

In English, one sound may and does have many spellings. For example, the sound which most of us think of *sh* may be represented in writing by *sh* as in *fish, s* as in *sure, ci* as in *gracious, sci* as in *conscience, ti* as in *nation, ssi* as in *mission,* and *ch* as in *machine.* Conversely one letter or combination of letters may represent several different sounds. Everyone is familiar with the many ways in which to pronounce the letter combination *ough: cough, tough, though, thorough, plough, through, hiccough.* Since consonants are considered more stable in pronunciation than vowels, it is surprising to notice how many variants there are for the pronunciation of the symbol *s.* Say *this, is, vision, fissure, island,* and remind yourself how difficult English spelling can be.

Etymology, true and false, has also contributed to our troubles. In *light* and *night* the *gh* combination represents something which was once sounded. In *delight* it represents a pseudo-scholar's error, since *delight* found its way into English from French *delite;* the *gh* crept in through analogy with *light* and *night.* The *cur* of *curfew* and the *ker* of *kerchief* are both well-worn remnants of the same French *couvre; curfew* is fire-covering time; and *kerchief* a head covering.

These are only a very few of the idiosyncrasies which make spelling so fascinating.

However, in spite of its inherent difficulties, English spelling is governed by some general principles, many of which are absorbed by most of us below the level of consciousness. For example, if you were asked to write these nonsense syllables *cumble,* very few of you would write *k* as the initial letter, although some might use *el,* or *al* for the final syllable. I would venture to guess that the majority would use *le.* Try the experiment with your class and with a group of adults. I guarantee interesting results, especially if you follow *cumble* with *kemble.* The general principles and the far more

Sybil Shack is principal of Isaac Brock School in Winnipeg. She is well known for her regular column in the magazine Monday Morning.

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abundant divergences from them constitute an entertaining pursuit and help to make the study of spelling, which can be difficult and frustrating, delightful and rewarding. Indeed, spelling need never be merely a dull exercise in recalling the order of letters in words.

Of course, spelling is more than a game or a contest. It remains an essential communications skill and is still in our world likely to be considered one mark not merely of the literate but of the educated person. Therefore, we as teachers have a responsibility for teaching it and for making sure that our teaching is effective, as it has not always been.

How do we achieve this goal? One way is by systematic instruction. I don't believe that spelling can be taught only incidentally, even though all of us learn much about spelling quite incidentally, almost subliminally. The system of teaching spelling, however, is probably not as important as following *some* system, or perhaps of being constantly aware of spelling and of making children regularly aware of it. In this regard, I should like to suggest a few guidelines.

Remember that spelling is a writing skill, not an oral skill or even a reading skill. While most good readers are also reasonably good spellers, some are not. Some excellent readers are poor spellers, and there is even the occasional poor reader who is a fairly good speller. Being able to read a word does not guarantee being able to spell it; all of us can recognize and even pronounce scores of words which we may not be able to spell either in or out of context. If this fact were not true, there would not be nearly the errors that are made in spelling such common words as *than, oblige, truly* and *their.* If spelling is a writing skill, then practice in spelling must be given in writing and not in spelling aloud. A good deal of the work we do in oral spelling is a waste of time for many children.

Remember that simply following steps in a spelling program, no matter how good they are, is not teaching. No program was ever devised which could teach all children, in exactly the same way, how to spell–or how to do anything else for that matter.

Avoid teaching rules which are not general enough to govern large numbers of words, or rules which are keys to pronunciation rather than to spelling. "Rules" or general principles should be *derived* from a multiplicity of examples and should never be taught as rules to be applied to a multiplicity of examples.

Finally, teach only words which children already have in their vocabulary. There is no point in drilling lists of words which children rarely use, or which only the occasional child uses–such words as *pharaoh,* or *subtrahend,* or *kayak.* These words can be supplied when required. Don't waste good time on teaching them in depth. The common exercise "Use in a sentence . . ." is, therefore, not too useful. A child should not have to use a word in a sentence to show that he knows its meaning, unless the word happens to have a homophone. By all means make opportunities for children to use the spelling words in contexts which mean something to them, but don't just ask them to "use in a sentence . . ." Ask a question which the word must answer (Who caught the robber? The *policeman* .). Suggest that such a word as *cross* or *iron* be used as a noun or an adjective or a verb, as the subject or the predicate of a sentence. Give a setting in which the word might be used naturally. And always remember to have children write the word in that context.

What words should be taught, and how many? We should teach words which are needed and used by children. It is profitable for us to remember that 500 words account for more than 50 percent of children's writing up to the end of Grade VI, and that most of these words are used first in the primary grades. A total of 1,000 words do about 90 percent of all the work, and 2,000 words including the 1,000 I have just referred to constitute about 95 percent of children's writing vocabulary. Absolute mastery of about 200 words would probably eliminate 65 percent of children's spelling errors from ages 7 to 12. I can only

conclude that most of us try to teach too many words. Because we teach too many, we fail to teach the basic list thoroughly enough. If in any school year we established firmly only one, just one, word every day, we could teach the core list of 200 words and eliminate 65 percent of pupil errors.

Let me hasten to say that children who are good spellers—and there are many—will and should learn far more than the basic list and, at the end of every school year, should be left with tools which will help them to spell longer, if less complicated, words than those which appear in the basic list. But it's the basic words which are so often misspelled. Here are some of the misspellings which I have culled in the past few months from notes sent to the school by parents: *beleive, recieve, stomache, acke, oblidge, truely, sincerly, shure, accomodate, auther, freind, grils (girls), howse, dissapointed, surprize, exuse, aquainted, no (know), writting, doe (do).* Excepting possibly *accommodate*, all these words are in the vocabulary of the eight-year old child. I am quite sure that the people writing them thought they knew how to spell them; otherwise the writers would have taken the trouble to check the spelling before writing. Which brings me to my next point: children and adults must be made aware of spelling, of being conscious of it. The words we misspell are almost always words we think we know. It is an important part of a teacher's job to make children word-conscious, to make them question spelling, to make them look closely at words to see how they are constructed and, if possible, why.

How should you go about your daily presentation of spelling words? I can give you no more than suggestions, or an outline of what I would do, since there are many good ways of teaching spelling, and you must select and adapt methods and approaches that suit you and your children.

I suggest that you group words according to common elements. For example, teach *who, do,* and *to* together. Don't teach *two, too,* and *shoe* in the same lesson, or until the first group of words is thoroughly assimilated. Don't confuse the poor speller and the poor classifier by presenting *go* and *so* with *who* and *do.* I know it is common practice to throw homophones like *to, two,* and *too* at children; my advice would be to leave them until each of the forms is thoroughly learned in its own context. Only then would I let children loose among homophones to enjoy and classify and contrast.

For better spellers in the upper elementary school, words may be grouped for teaching according to common origin or construction. Often even children of limited linguistic ability are interested in how words are made and where they come from. Word families can provide a centre of interest in teaching spelling. For example, the following commonly used words are derived from forms and compounds of the Latin verb *facio, factum,* to do or make: *fact, factory, manufacture, perfect, satisfy, office, benefit.* Another prolific family is derived from Latin *mitto, missum,* to send. Children love to explore the various avenues opened by an examination of two words like *permit* and *missionary.* By changing prefixes they can obtain *remit, admit, emit, omit, commit.* The addition of a suffix supplies *admittance* and *remittance.* It won't take long for the more interested among your pupils to come up with such words as *permission, admission, emission, omission, mission, permissible.* These children can also investigate the differences in meaning between *admittance* and *admission.* The exploratory activity provides a marvellous opportunity for enrichment through vocabulary expansion and dictionary adventures.

Words can and should be grouped for teaching according to their phonetic elements. I say this with caution, and I warn you against the misconception that more phonics is an inevitable aid to spelling. I think it is safe to say that the greatest number of errors in spelling arises as a result of trying to make English spelling conform with "phonics". Unfortu-

nately for the child who spells by ear, there are many pitfalls to be avoided. For one thing, English has over 2,000 homophones. Many of these are quite "regular" phonically. That is, both *ee* and *ea* are regular ways of spelling the sound commonly called *long e* so that knowing phonics does not help in any way to spell *meat* or *meet* correctly; nor does knowing phonics help to spell *sale* or *sail; pare, pear,* or *pair; see* or *sea; be* or *bee; write, rite* or *right; principal* or *principle; bow* or *bough* or the many hundreds of other regular homophones that are undoubtedly included in the 85 percent of English which according to the phonic fiends (*f* or *ph*?) is strictly phonic. Also, phonics cannot help a child to decide whether the final *o* in a word should be spelled *oe* as in *hoe, o* as in *go ow* as in *slow* (or is it *slough*? No, no, that's *slu,* or maybe *sluff*). Look at the following list to see how confusing the phonic approach can be: *ate, eh?, eight, pail, say, break, they, rain, rein, reign.*

Above all, take individual differences among your pupils into account when you teach spelling. Too often we spend time on teaching words to children who already know how to spell them. In so doing we deprive those pupils who need individual or group help. Discover early in the term who your good spellers are, and excuse them from a good part but by no means from all of the spelling instruction. Let them work on vocabulary enrichment and the many interesting things they can do with words. Use the time you save to give extra help to those children who need it. Concentrate on the few key words for the really poor spellers. For the main group in your class, concentrate on the words in the spelling list which these children misspell. Don't teach too many words at one time, regardless of the number in the "unit" within the speller you may be using. Even for good spellers it is a mistake to present 20 words or so at one time, especially if they are not closely related in structure. Always bear in mind the limitations of the poor spellers. Praise lavishly for good spelling when you get it from the poorer spellers; praise even for a move in the right direction, for spelling that shows some insight into the generalizations you are trying to establish. It is not enough to be annoyed about poor or careless spelling; it is important to recognize achievements, however small.

Finally, if you find glamour and depth in the exploration of English words, your children are likely to enjoy their spelling lessons. Look at the words you have to present with the kind of interest they deserve. They will reward you by the countless insights they give in return: insights into the use of language, its growth, its constant change, its infinite richness. Spelling can't be dull for your children if you bring it alive, if you see it as a mirror of history and of life itself.

All this does not mean that phonics cannot be a useful *aid* in teaching spelling, especially when sounds fall within the patterning of what has been called "word families": *make, take, lake; pay, say, lay; action, fraction, traction.* However, make sure that children realize that sound can be only a guide and must be reinforced by careful observation of the printed and written form of the word.

If you are interested only in getting good spelling results on dictated lists of selected words, then undoubtedly the best way is simply to dictate the words, have pupils check them, check them yourself, have pupils study the words they misspelled, dictate again, correct, dictate, and so on until there is complete mastery. Maybe ultimately this is the only way to ensure complete and final mastery of a reasonably short basic spelling list. But it can be deadly dull unless pupils are highly motivated to learn spelling, and I suspect it is deadly dull even then. Children put up with the deadliness and the dullness for the sake of end results.

My contention is that spelling need not be dull. After all, it consists of the study of words, and words are the centre of thought and speech. We can teach children various routines that will help them remember the spelling of

words. We can set up for them a systematic pattern for study: (1) look at the word and its parts; (2) say the word; (3) think how it is spelled; (4) write the word; (5) check the spelling of the written word; (6) practise the correct spelling if an error has been made. Ultimately, however, the teacher's job is to see that children are interested, that they want to be able to spell correctly, and that they will take the time and the care to make themselves good spellers.

It is therefore absolutely necessary that a variety of methods be used, and that the methods be adapted to the children who are to learn. Suggest to pupils that they use visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approaches in their own study. In your presentation make use of any device that will focus interest on a word–its meaning, its history, its structure. Anything which makes the pupil look at and think about a word is useful. Draw attention to the spelling of words in reading and other language work. Play spelling games, especially those which require writing words or handling letters–jigsaws, riddles, crosswords, Scrabble, Hang-the-man, acrostics, etc. Make spelling interesting! ●